

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE ORIGIN OF THE PIASA BLUFFS ASSEMBLY, NOW CALLED

THE NEW PIASA CHAUTAUQUA ASSOCIATION

Jersey County, Illinois.

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THE BEGINNING OF THE MOVEMENT:

Some time during the summer of the year 1885; Two Committees were appointed; one of these from the Southern Illinois Sunday School Conference and the other from the St. Louis Ministerial Association of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

THE PURPOSE WAS TO ORGANIZE A WESTERN CHAUTAUQUA:

These committees were instructed and authorized to find a suitable and convenient location and to organize and secure a charter for a Western Chautauqua Assembly to be modeled after the plan of the Mother Chautauqua at Chautauqua Lake New York.

These Committees were composed of prominent ministers and laymen of St. Louis and Southern Illinois Conference.

THE COMMITTEE FROM ST. LOUIS:

Ministers Rev. Benj. St. James Fry, D.D. Editor Central Christian Advocate.
Laymen: J. A. Field and Fletcher M. Doan.

THE COMMITTEE FROM THE SOUTHERN ILLINOIS SUNDAY SCHOOL CONFERENCE:

Ministers: J.W. Phillips, Presiding Elder Alton District.

R. H. Manier, Edwardsville, J.A. Scarrett, Alton
F. M. Van Treese, Jerseyville.

Laymen: Morris R. Locke, Jerseyville, Geo. W. Brown, Vandalia, Theo.
Harrison, Belleville.

SELECTING SUITABLE GROUNDS:

About the first of July, 1885 these two committees met at Alton accompanied by Mrs. J.A. Scarrett and her sister Mrs. J.W. Caldwell. The committee chartered the steamer Alton and proceeded up the Mississippi River and landed at the upper bluff of the present Chautauqua grounds. They proceeded up the valley in search of the Piasa Spring.

On landing they found a cabin and a field of green corn on the plot of ground on which the inn was afterwards built.

THE PIASA SPRING:

Was the center of attraction. If it had not been for the great spring the grounds would never have been selected. The spring was found to be in its natural condition as the Red men left it a hundred years before. No doubt in an early day the Indians camped in the valley and obtained their supply of water from the Piasa spring. Many Indian arrow heads and other relics have been found in the valley.

HOW THE COMMITTEE FOUND THE GROUNDS ONXX THEIR FIRST VISIT:

After landing they proceeded up the ravine through a tangled mass of vines and thick undergrowth until they reached the spring. There was evidence that a



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house once stood where the store is now located and a stable once stood where the Auditorium now stands. Both of these buildings had disappeared; and the main part of the ground where the Cottages now stand was an old abandoned corn field. But now grown up with briars and small bushes., forming a veritable nest for wasps, yellow jackets, hornets and rattlesnakes.

THE FIRST RELIGIOUS SERVICES ON THE GROUND:

While the men were making a survey of the grounds; at the noon hour, the ladies of the party spread a cloth in front of the Piasa Spring and a lunch was served. After the lunch a hymn "All Hail the power of Jesus' Name" was sung, prayer was offered, and some speeches made by ministers and laymen. The Committee agreed that the grounds would be adapted for a Western Chautauqua.

THE NEXT THING WAS TO PURCHASE AND SECURE THE CONTROL OF THE GROUNDS:

The ground needed belonged to a tract of land of 410 acres, owned by a lady, Mrs. Mc Cairn. This tract gave control of the Valley between the Bluffs along the river front.

It was more land than was needed for the purpose but the lady refused to sell apart. The committee was compelled to buy the whole tract and the land was purchased the following year.

THE CAMP MEETING:

It was decided that day to hold a camp meeting in order to advertise the enterprise and the grounds and various committees were appointed on Tents, Grounds, Publicity and Program.

The owner of the land would not give possession for the camp meeting, to be held until the deal was closed. The camp meeting was held in what was then called "Babbs Hollow" near a spring and was largely attended. Many families tented on the grounds from St. Louis and near by towns in Illinois.

PREPARING THE GROUNDS FOR THE CAMP MEETING:

Rev. L. E. Cole, pastor M.E.Church, Elsah, took charge of the preparation. A day was set and the people of Jersey County invited to meet and prepare the ground for the camp meeting.

The noon hour was set apart for the religious service. The writer was invited to preach on the occasion and took for his text "Exodus 14-15 "Speak unto the people that they go forward."

THE FIRST PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT:

Mr. Morris R. Lock of Jerseyville Committee on publicity issued the first circular July 13, 1885, announcing the camp meeting to begin Tuesday, August 25, 1885 and to last one week.

In that circular he describes the Piasa Bluffs Assembly grounds as follows: "They are on the banks of the Mississippi River in Jersey Co. 37 miles above St. Louis, 12 miles above Alton, 12 miles from Jerseyville, 57 miles from Jacksonville and 84 miles from Springfield."

THE OBJECT OF THE PIASA BLUFFS ASSEMBLY.

Is to maintain a Summer Resort for literary, scientific and religious instruction and culture similar to the great Chautauqua Lake Assembly. It rivals the locality of any similar association in the country.

The scenery is grand, the Bluffs overlook the valleys of three rivers the mighty Mississippi, the Missouri and the Illinois Rivers.

The Assembly grounds are immediately on the Bluffs of the Mississippi. The Missouri and the Illinois rivers can be plainly seen in the distance coursing their way through the rich and fertile valleys of Missouri and Illinois. No lovlier place can be found in the West.

There are numerous springs of pure water on the land and plenty of shade.

THE PICTURED ROCKS:

To add to the charm of this location was the significant name "The Piasa Bluffs given in early days to the chain of magnificent bluffs from Alton to Grafton; and Indian legends and traditions of the Piasa Bird. This dragon was pictured on the rocks of the Bluffs. It was reported visible as late as 1849 to 1857. It was described as a composite monster. The face of a man, horns of a deer, the wings of a bird, the claws of a lion and the tail of a serpent.

The tradition was that this dragon was the enemy of the Indians and destroyed many of the Illini Indians until it was destroyed by a young chiefton of the tribe.

THE PIASA BLUFFS ASSEMBLY WAS INCORPORATED

in July 1885 according to laws of the State of Illinois.

INCORPORATORS:

Rev. Benj St James Fry, D.D. J. A. Field, Fletsher M. Doan, St. Louis, Mo. Rev. R. H. Manier, Edwardsville. Geo. W. Brown, Vandalia, Theo. Harrison, Belleville and Morris R. Locke, Jerseyville. *Wm. A. Smith, Jr.*

THE SECOND CAMP MEETING WAS HELD ON THE GROUNDS: The land having been purchased since the first camp meeting. The writer was elected corresponding secretary and visited churches and schoolhouses and sold stock at \$50.00 per share until enough money was secured to purchase the tract of land.

AT THE CLOSE OF THE SECOND CAMP MEETING

Rev J. A. Scarrett was elected Superintendent of the Grounds. During his management the grounds were platted. Trees planted, streets and avenues laid out, the Auditorium and many of the public buildings and cottages were built.

The Piasa Bluffs Assembly held its annual meetings with its programs of literary, scientific and religious instruction and culture until the year 1908. That year it failed to meet its financial obligations.

THE NEW PIASA CHAUTAUQUA ASSOCIATION was organized in 1909, taking over the liabilities of the Piasa Bluffs Assembly, and has ever since conducted the place as a Summer Resprt.

It is interesting to note that Mrs Nettie B. Roades Chautauqua has been identified with this movement from the beginning. She was in the Company that cleared ground for the First Camp Meeting and was one of the original Stockholders.

This paper is prepared at the request of the LADIES CIVIC IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION., in as much as the writer is the only member of the Committee now living, who selected the ground and organized the Piasa Bluffs Assembly.

F. M. VAN TREESE,

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East St. Louis, Illinois.

